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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MARGARET BUSH WILSON

April 24, 1974

by Frederick B. Wright

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

An oral interview with Mrs. Margaret Bush Wilson, attorney at law. A couple questions I'd like to ask you, Mrs. Wilson. Would you describe your educational background and tell about any problems encountered while pursuing your career as a black woman in law?

WILSON: Well, I'm a native St. Louisan and studied in the public schools of St. Louis, graduated from Sumner High School in 1935. Did my undergraduate college work at Talladega College, spelled T-A-L-L-A-D-E-G-A in Talladega, Alabama, which was, and still is a very reknowned institution founded by the American Missionary Association. I graduated from Talladega in 1940 and entered law school here in St. Louis at what was then known as the Lincoln University School of Law, which no longer exists and which has now been merged with the University of Missouri. Following completion of my law school career, which was a three-year course, I took a Civil Service examination for lawyers, which I passed and subsequently received a Federal appointment as a lawyer for the Legal Division of the Rural Electrification

Administration, which was an arm of the United States Department of Agriculture and which at that time had offices decentralized in St. Louis.

WRIGHT: Mrs. Wilson, as one of the influential women I have selected in the St. Louis area, what did education do to the sense of self as being a black woman going to law school and finishing and after receiving your appointment, how did you feel then?

WILSON: Well, I think education gives most persons a sense of feeling of confidence, of security, and I'm sure my education did too. But I think I owe a great deal of whatever sense of self I have to my parents, not just because they're the ones who provided me with this education but because in their own right they were perceptive people who understood the importance of helping their children to have a feeling of self-worth. And if I wanted to pinpoint one great influence I would say it would be the influence of both my mother and father had in encouraging me to achieve and to be my best self, and to make these things possible by their own personal sacrifice.

WRIGHT: Okay, your parents were supportive in your career as a lawyer. Why did you decide to stay in the St. Louis area and practice law?

WILSON: I welcome the opportunity to answer this question because as I think back, not a single one of my girlhood associates lives in St. Louis now. But I'm here because, number one, I'm a third-generation St. Louisian and because this city is a kind of challenge to me. It has all the potentials of greatness. My impression is the one thing we need is a great deal more creative leadership, and at the risk of seeming immodest I like to think maybe if I'm around and can work with some people who have vision that this city can become what I think it ought to be.

WRIGHT: As a lawyer, what is your opinion of day-care centers, Mrs. Wilson?

WILSON: Well, let me say that I may have a bit of bias because I'm the lawyer for two corporations in this city whose business it is to provide this kind of service and I've helped them in one case to actually incorporate and in another to move forward with the administration and the programmatic aspects of their activities. And I am very supportive, both of the idea and the principle and of the program as a practical way in which parent and child can be benefitted. It of course depends, again, on the quality of leadership. But if a center is carefully organized and planned and has the resources to provide the services that young children need it can be a very important molding influence in the lives of children. I'm persuaded that Wilson Lyles is absolutely correct. He is the, of course, very impressive head of the education system in the state of California and he made a comment recently that unlike some areas we know what the solutions are in education, and the key is to get the children early.

WRIGHT: Okay, thank you, Mrs. Wilson. Another question, how do you feel about work benefits for mothers?

WILSON: Well, let me be clear about what you mean about work benefits. Do you mean just working, period, or you mean particular kinds of privileges that go with working? Well, I think not so much in terms of people as male and female. I think in terms of people as people and my strong conviction is you ought to do what will bring you the greatest fulfillment as often and as fully as you can do it, and that is whether you are black, white, male, female, Chinese and, you know, you name it. At least this is the way I have functioned and I would hope that a great many more people would try to work at this. You can't always pull it off, but to the extent you can do this and move into a field where you feel a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment you make for yourself a creative life and you are a better person. As for benefits, obviously I am very concerned about the whole business of so many

having so little and so few having so much. And that's not just in this country, that's kind of a world-wide kind of thing and to the extent we can begin to close the gap between this, I think we have a responsibility.

WRIGHT: Do you feel it was a hinderance to the female pursuing a career in law or do you feel it was an advantage, and if so why?

WILSON: Well, again I suspect if I thought about it a great deal I might have, you know, it just never occurred to me. This is what I wanted to do and I'd presumed and assumed that I would go ahead with it. To be quite frank I have not, in my own personal career found any great deal of difficulty in moving ahead because of my sex or my race. Now that may be because I've sort of turned out to be a phenomena or at least I was in the early days and so startled people that I just sort of moved along and got ahead before they realized what was going on. But I can't recall a single instance where I have not been accepted appropriately in a courtroom. I think a great deal of how you get accepted in any situation is how you present yourself in the first place, and a good lawyer learns early to be self-assured. And I have a kind of sense of assurance that I do not hesitate to move and do what has to be done in my profession, and some people are startled when I appear and a great many others underrate me until it's too late, and it gets to be great fun.

WRIGHT: Mrs. Wilson, as one of the influential women of St. Louis that I have chosen, in your words, what would you describe as an influential person. Not necessarily a woman, and would you give me an example of some people that you feel are influential, whether they are a lady in St. Louis or even nation-wide?

WILSON: Well, I think you can appreciate the fact that I may have some reservations about your use of the word influential, at least with respect with myself. And yet on the other hand I have to agree that everybody can influence somebody sometime in

in some area. I once heard Eleanor Roosevelt say that people of and in themselves are not that important in terms of the sweep of events. They grow in importance to the extent that they are associated with movements or institutions that achieve some kind of significant impact on a community or on people. And I would assume it's in that sense that I could talk about influence. And as I think over the years of people who have have impact and do have influence, I can recall some names that stand out for me. One of them is a very distinguished lady of this community whose name is Edna Gellhorn who was one of the early leaders of the League of Women Voters movement and who in her quiet but very determined way had a tremendous impact on this community in the early days when women really were second-class citizens. I think a woman like Mary McLeod Bethune, who really was the founder of any organized movement among black women in this country and was the person who, along with others, spearheaded the organization of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, which still exists, founded back in the 1800's and which has, as its purpose lifting the sights of women in general and black women in particular, and was formed, as you know, because there was so much parochial and demeaning kinds of things being said about black women, both in this country and abroad, and it was an effort to combat that. In my own generation, I have great respect for Barbara Jordan, who sits in Congress now and who is described by a recent reporter as the most intelligent and brightest member of the House Judiciary Committee. And for a daily newspaper reporter to make that kind of a comment about a black woman who is a member of Congress is to me very, very significant. Influence can be wielded in many ways, and I suppose I tend to function more in the background rather than the foreground, and use my skills in the legal profession to help groups and organizations become respected in the community, and I suppose it's in that sense that I gather your talking about me being influential.

WRIGHT": Right.

WILSON: And of course there are leadership people in the NAACP by the hundreds, some of them unsung, but who are in my judgment kind of the backbone of the civil rights movement in particular and the whole thrust for human dignity in general. Daisy Lampkins was one of these. She's now deceased, but at one time she was a very dynamic leader in the NAACP and generated enthusiastically for years the support that that association needed at a very crucial time in its history. In this connection I might add that for the second time in a row I will be presiding at the national convention of the NAACP this year, and, um, this is a tribute to women, because to my knowledge there has never been a woman presiding officer in the history of the association before.

WRIGHT: As a member of the NAACP myself I did happen to see your picture as a recipient of a reward that was in the Crisis magazine. Could you explain to us a little bit about what the award was about?

WILSON: I think I just did. It was in recognition of my contribution to the leadership of the organization over the years as a member of the board and finally as a top presiding officer, which is, as you probably know is a very, very difficult assignment and one which I suspect a great many people thought a woman couldn't handle. And it was after a rather exciting and, I thought, rewarding experience in Indianapolis when the convention, despite the absence of the chairman of the board, who was ill, and the loss of the presiding chairman for many years, who had died a few days before the convention, that I managed to preside in such a way that the business was accomplished with a certain quality of dignity and, and I think I hope charm which women bring to situations, that those who select these awardees felt that this merited some kind of recognition.

WRIGHT: Okay. Mrs. Wilson, do you feel that women in law have become more influential now than what they were than, say perhaps when you first began to practice law?

WILSON:: I think I can say yes, but women are a long ways from being as influential as I think they ought to be in this country. By comparison it strikes me as being very odd that, considering the climate in America in terms of the opportunity, that by comparison with some other countries, women, for example, in the professions are very, very scarce. Lawyers, doctors, engineers, you name it, there are very few. And yet these are fields, particularly I think in medicine and in law to some extent where women can make a very real contribution and where they are needed, and I'm hoping that out of this ferment we call "the Women's Liberation Movement" will come this movement toward women becoming more involved in the day to day business of what goes on in this country. I am inclined to think that John Kenneth Galbraith may be right about an observation he made recently. "There has been a very real and steady effort to persuade a host of women about the importance of staying home because it helps to sell refrigerators and that we must not allow ourselves to get caught up in the business of consumer comfort to the point where we give up our own identity and our own skills and ability to contribute. I managed to have a profession and to bear a child and maintain a home and to do these things with not too great difficulty, and I think more women ought to look at this and reassess their own choices, because so many of them simply move away from any personal involvement that involves their own fulfillment until after their children are reared and grown and then suddenly they feel very lost and frustrated. I had a personal friend whom I hadn't seen in years until quite recently who lamented the fact that she had wasted eighteen years, and I didn't quite understand what she was talking about and she was referring to the eighteen years when she had been home rearing her

children. So it has to be a blend, a mellowing of these things, and it relates to the earlier question you mentioned about the day care centers. There are ways in which children can be cared for that free women to be themselves.

WRIGHT: Mrs. Wilson, would you list or explain for me a few of your professional and social affiliations?

WILSON: Well, let me see. I serve now on the state council of the Missouri Law Enforcement Assistance Council which is an appointment by the Governor. I serve as secretary of the Health and Welfare Council of the City of St. Louis. I'm a member of the National Board of Directors of the NAACP. I'm the treasurer of the NAACP's National Housing Corporation, and in the past I have served on numerous boards and commissions of various kinds covering Girl Scouts, YWCA, Nursery Foundation, Health and Welfare Council, which I'm still a part of, church federations. I'm appalled at some of these, it just seems to be going on and on. But right now I think my real interest is to move in the direction of using what legal skills and training I do have to provide a quality of representation to business people in our community who are serious about finding and obtaining for themselves what we call a "piece of the action." And I think one of the most exciting things that I've experienced is working with a young corporation that has just started out that is just going beautifully and is achieving in significant ways the goals they had set for themselves and to watch this develop. I think this is kind of exciting, because I think this is the frontier that black people must deal with very realistically, and that's cementing and securing the kind of economic base in this country which gives us our part of the power and direction that goes with being a part of this nation. I think we've achieved in many ways significant gains in the social area. There's still things to be done in education, but at least we've moved away from the rigid segregated

pattern. Public accomodations are so open and available it's sort of astonishing compared with fifteen years ago. But despite the tremendous income of the total black community in this nation, it is not reflected in a significant ownership role in the economy, and I think without that we still have a long way to go.

WRIGHT: One final question, Mrs. Wilson, what advice or suggestions would you give to another woman should she become interested in the field of law?

WILSON: Well, I'm kind of reluctant to give advice, but I would certainly commend the law as a field for a person who, number one, likes to read, she can't get very far unless she likes to do that, into law, and number two, the law is a kind of, they say, a jealous mistress, and if you're not willing to give a great deal of time over and beyond a kind of eight-hour day arrangement that is traditionally thought of as a full-time responsibility, then don't go near the law, because you will not be spending eight-hour days. Your hours will be long and will wander over into the weekends. But at the same time, of all the professions I have a feeling that the law is the one that can have the most influence for social change. And it also, unquestionably gives you a sense of competence. Once you've had legal training there's not much you can't find out if you know, if you've really gone through a first-rate course in law. You will be able to find the answers to most things you want to know, and that's an awfully good feeling. I commend it to women and to men.

WRIGHT: Thank you, Mrs. Bush. This concludes the oral interview with attorney Margaret Bush Wilson, attorney at law and community leader.